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SUBJECT: MILITIAS IN BASRAH -- DIRTY POLITICS PERSONIFIED

REF: (A) BAGHDAD 812; (B) BASRAH 49; (C) BASRAH 30; (D) BASRAH 49; (E) BASRAH 26; (F) BASRAH 52; (G) BASRAH 53; (H) 05 BASRAH 140
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CLASSIFIED BY: Ken Gross, Regional Coordinator, REO Basrah,
Department of State.
REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

1. (C) Summary: Most of the militias in Basrah are controlled by political parties or, in some instances, are now political parties in their own right. The insidious nature of militias acting as political parties - or vice versa - makes politics in Basrah particularly perverse. The Fadillah party denies that it has a militia, though through its members in the police and the Oil Protection Force it has the most powerful armed group in Basrah. The Badr Organization is the best organized and most professional of the militias. Its members are deeply embedded in the government, but its leader in Basrah, Hassan al-Rashid, strongly avers that Badr has transitioned and now is a political party that will not resort to strong-arm or illegal tactics. A smaller militia is Sayid al-Shuhadaa, led by parliamentarian Sayid Dagher and loosely linked to Badr/SCIRI. It has strong connections to Iran. Jaysh-al-Mahdi is wildly unpredictable and lacks concrete direction. Many of its members and units operate autonomously from Muqtada al-Sadr and pursue different interests. The members of Thar Allah are small in number, and its leader, Sayid Yusif, also professes - though less convincingly than al-Rashid - to have traded the role of militia commander for political leader. End Summary.

2. (C) The insurgency in Basrah differs from that faced by Iraqi government and Coalition Forces in many other areas in Iraq. The insurgency in Basrah is Shia militia based; Sunni insurgents and foreign terrorists' presence in southern Iraq is minimal. Militias, however, are just as perilous to the fabric of Iraq's society and its future as the operations mounted by Al Qaeda and other terrorist groups. (See Ref A for background on militias.) Shia militias are an integral part of the political process in Basrah, and the leaders of particularly virulent militias are key political figures. Hasneen al-Safi, a member of the BPC and a focal point for human rights, recently complained to Regional Embassy Office (REO) Basrah that militia forces control the streets of Basrah - much more so than the Iraqi police. Based on conversations with political and militia leaders, this cable describes the predominant militias in Basrah.

"Fadillah Party Has No Militia"

3. (C) Governor Muhammad Mossibh al-Wa'eli, who reputedly is involved in oil smuggling, assassinations and other political skullduggery, repeatedly stated quite clearly to the Basrah Regional Coordinator (RC) that Fadillah has no militia. Perhaps he meant that Fadillah does not have one particular entity that operates as a militia; Fadillah -- or more precisely the governor and Abu Salom, a Basrah Provincial Council member representing Fadillah (see Ref B) - controls substantial portions of the Oil Protection Force (OPF) and the Serious Crimes Unit (SCU) and Tactical Support Unit (TSU) of the Basrah police. These units act as a de facto militia for Fadillah. (See Ref C for more on the governor's relationship with Abu Salom.) Sayid Yusif, the head of Thar Allah and a sworn enemy of the governor, accuses him of being behind most of the violence in Basrah, including recent rocket attacks on the REO Basrah compound.

4. (S) In fact, as noted by Sheik Mansour al-Khanaan, a prominent tribal leader in Basrah, the Fadillah militia is the strongest and most dangerous since its members run operations under the cloak of governmental authority. Members wear their OPF or police uniforms, use their government-issued weapons and drive their official vehicles while carrying out illegal activities. Fadillah has an estimated 1,500 active members currently working in the OPF, SCU and TSU. Other Fadillah party members besides the governor deny the existence of any sort of party-based militia. The titular head of Fadillah in Basrah, Dr. Hayder al-Wa'eli, told the RC that militias "are not present in Basrah at all." Though still disavowing any Fadillah militia, the governor does admit that many militias have infiltrated the police.

5. (S) According to Majed al-Sari, the intelligence chief and representative of the Ministry of Defense (MOD) in Basrah, the governor's brother, Ismail Mossibh al-Wa'eli, leads a group that functions as a death squad or sort of quick reaction force for the governor. (See Ref D.) Bio Note: Ismail was an unsuccessful independent candidate on List 756 in the December 15 parliamentary election. During the election campaign he told

the RC that the coalition needed to remain in Iraq for a few more years to provide security. He also boasted of his Sadr roots: he said he formerly was the head of the public affairs

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office for Sadr, and his name was listed on Sadr.com. According to Ismail, he even was at one time Muqtada al-Sadr's boss. End Bio Note.

Badr Organization: Well Organized and Entrenched

16. (C) Badr Organization, closely affiliated with SCIRI and the second most powerful militia, is the largest in Basrah with 2,500 - 3,000 members, most of them "underground" in the police and other governmental organizations. Its members are professional, with good military expertise; they follow instructions and unlike Fadillah's militia, they are not readily identified as members of Badr because they work for a particular organization or unit. After the conflict with Saddam was over, Badr reorganized itself and inserted its members into government positions. Sheik Mansour estimates that 50 percent of the police are members of Badr. (Comment: Given the secrecy surrounding Badr membership, it is difficult to ascertain the exact number of Badr members in the police. However, the 50 percent estimate of Sheik Mansour's probably is too high a figure. End Comment.) Its strength comes from its strong organization and the loyalty of its members.

17. (C) The Secretary General of Badr Organization in Basrah is Hassan al-Rashid, a former governor of Basrah and current member of its Provincial Council. He is a polished politician, careful and measured in his speech, who could be next in line for the governorship should Governor Muhammad's many enemies succeed in toppling him. (See Refs F and G.) He spent six years in Iran and travels there frequently, though he says that he does not speak Farsi. When the RC offered to interpret for Hassan during his next trip to Iran, Hassan jokingly offered to bring him along.

18. (C) Hassan said that Badr maintains a friendly relationship with Iran since it provided a safe haven and support for so many Iraqis during the Saddam years and asserted that he agrees with Iran on some issues. He denied, however, any direct support from Iran at this time and pointed out that any issue related to Iran for Badr must go through him. Hassan reaffirmed that Badr is committed to the political process. In discussing militias - and particularly Fadillah's - he recently said, "the most powerful militia is not the one with the most weapons but the one that has the most people behind it."

Masters of the Martyrs Really Masters of the Political Process

19. (C) Closely related to SCIRI/Badr, Sayid al-Shuhadaa, or Masters of the Martyrs, is led by Sayid Dagher al-Musawi. Besides being general secretary for Sayid al-Shuhadaa, Sayid Dagher represents Muthanna province in the Council of Representatives. During a recent meeting at his headquarters, he told the RC that Sayid al-Shuhadaa's goals are one Iraq, united under democratic principles, with a strong federalist system that provides for equal distribution of revenues and free medical insurance. Speaking in platitudes, Sayid Dagher stressed his love of democracy and said that this is the "golden time" for political parties in Iraq since they could now operate in a truly free political environment. Sayid Dagher said that there were similarities between Sayid al-Shuhadaa and SCIRI/Badr, but they also have slight differences of opinions. However, Abdul Aziz al-Hakim leads the political process for them all.

20. (C) Sayid Dagher totally rejected any Iranian influence in Basrah, saying that though both peoples are Shia, "they're Iranians and we're Iraqis." Many Iraqis are called "Iranian" because of time spent in Iran during Saddam's era, but Sayid Dagher said Iranians and Iraqis have divergent interests. He denied any evidence existed of Iranian influence or pressure. Majed al-Sari, the MOD's intelligence representative, tells a different story. According to him, Sayid al-Shuhadaa members are specially chosen by Iran, and the organization functions as an "advance intelligence unit" in Basrah. He asserted that it cooperates with SCIRI, but is not closely linked at the lower levels. The number of armed members of Sayid al-Shuhadaa is uncertain, but best estimates put it at a few hundred. More so than the other militias, its activities are shrouded in secrecy. When the RC asked Sayid Dagher about the oft-repeated description of Sayid al-Shuhadaa as the "Iranian Embassy in Basrah," he quickly changed the subject and launched into an esoteric and convoluted discussion of democracy.

Jaysh al-Mahdi - Lots of Action, Less Direction

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21. (C) Jaysh al-Mahdi, or JAM, is the best known of the militias in Basrah and receives the most press coverage. Created as the military wing of the Office of the Martyr Sadr, it maintains ties but rejects the prospect of bring part of the political process. JAM has an estimated 1,500-1,700 hard-core members in Basrah, though it can rally substantial numbers of sympathizers for demonstrations as evidenced after the bombing of the Golden Mosque in Samarra on February 22 (Ref E). JAM members are suspected of being behind many of the rocket and IED attacks against Coalition Forces..

¶12. (C) JAM lacks strong leadership in Basrah, and its units are very diffuse. Muqtada al-Sadr is only a figurehead for JAM, exerting only partial control on the more important issues. Local operations, however, are out of the scope of Muqtada's control, and the crazy quilt of actions by various local JAM units shows no coherency. JAM units in Basrah frequently follow their own individual agendas, sometimes in tandem with Fadillah and other times according to the direction of the individual unit's leader. The current leader - if there is one - of JAM in Basrah is unknown.

¶13. (C) Sheikh Mansour equates this lack of strong leadership in JAM with institutional weakness. Though JAM members are easy to rally and exhibit much enthusiasm, without a strong religious figure to follow they are subject to many other influences. Most JAM members follow their own interests or those of their unit leader or their mosque. Sheikh Mansour asserts that providing decent employment opportunities for young men would reduce JAM membership considerably.

¶14. (C) Sayid Yusif, the head of Thar Allah, corroborated Muqtada al-Sadr's lack of operational control over JAM in Basrah. His example was an alleged order by Sadr that JAM should retain its separate identity and not cooperate with Fadillah; Sayid Yusif said that individual JAM units work with Fadillah whenever they have a confluence of interests despite Sadr's strictures. Sheikh Mansour complained about cooperation between Fadillah and JAM after an IPS office two months ago arrested a member of a Fadillah hit squad who had killed a member of Sheikh Mansour's tribe. Both Fadillah and JAM elements attacked tribal members protecting the police station where the Fadillah member was jailed. This commonality of interests among some of the militias, according to Sheikh Mansour, has "reduced the trust of the people in the law to below zero."

Thar Allah - Punching Above its Weight

¶15. (C) Thar Allah, or "Revenge of God," dates back to the Saddam regime when, according to its leader, Sayid Yusif, it conducted military operations against government forces. It formerly was known as the "Followers' Committee." Sayid Yusif told the RC that Thar Allah now is strictly an Islamic political party that adheres to the political path. Hassan al-Rashid of Badr recently told the RC that Seyid Yusif had decided to turn to politics rather than stay outside of the political process. Differentiating it from other militias, Sayid Yusif said that Thar Allah is not like Badr Organization - "that's still a military organization." Sayid Yusif is next in line to sit on the Basrah Provincial Council and seeks to burnish his political credentials. (See Ref D.)

¶16. (C) Seyid Yusif reportedly has approximately 100-150 armed militia members available to do his bidding. In an "odd couple" like pairing, Majed al-Sari, the MOD representative in Basrah, is a close friend of Seyid Yusif. (Comment: Repeated attempts by the RC to meet with Seyid Yusif were unsuccessful until the RC asked Majed al-Sari to assist. Without bothering to check with Seyid Yusif, Majed al-Sari immediately arranged for a meeting three days later. End Comment.) Majed al-Sari told the RC that he was investigating Seyid Yusif before launching an arrest operation, but once he had an opportunity to speak to him Majed al-Sari realized "he is not a fanatic." Majed al-Sari admitted that Seyid Yusif had killed some people, but not all of those he is reported to have murdered. Seyid Yusif makes his money from working with people in commerce and in government and sometimes extorting money from those who smuggle goods. Majed al-Sari added, "Seyid Yusif believes that it is good when bad activities are attributed to him since it makes more people afraid of him."

¶17. (C) The close friendship between Majed al-Sari and Seyid Yusif may have been cemented because of a mutual hatred of Basrah Governor Muhammad. Both ardently desire his removal, with Seyid Yusif perhaps interested in a more violent termination of services. During a meeting with the RC, Seyid

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Yusif repeatedly asked when Coalition Forces would arrest the governor, and as he was leaving Seyid Yusif requested that "if some sort of independent action is taken against the governor, please do not intervene." The RC told Seyid Yusif that Coalition Forces would enforce the law against any group taking illegal actions and strongly recommended that Seyid Yusif abjure any extra-legal means to oust the governor. The governor wholeheartedly reciprocates Seyid Yusif's enmity, accusing him of being responsible for conducting assassinations for Iran and vowing to arrest him soon.

¶18. (C) Comment: The influence of militias is pervasive in all elements of Basrah society. Militias conduct political vendettas, extortion, murders and kidnappings, and some enforce a strict fundamentalist version of Islam on local residents. (See Ref H for background on the Islamification of Basrah.) Businesses operate in this militia-influenced atmosphere by either acquiescing to militia pressure or trying to maintain some separation. Jabbar A.H. al-Uelbi, the general manager of South Oil Company, said he does not interfere with the Oil Protection Force and only "coordinates" with it. He remains apolitical, though even with his non-partisan stance his headquarters building was set on fire last year and a small bomb exploded outside of his office six weeks ago.

¶19. (C) Comment continued: There is no simple solution to rid Basrah of militias. The best way forward is to encourage what already is occurring to a very limited degree with Badr Organization - the transformation of a militia into a political party committed to a democratic system of government. We need to work closely with Badr and all militia/political parties to

persuade them that full participation in the political process is more rewarding for its members. For some Basrah militias, this will not be feasible, but they still need to be encouraged to rely solely on political activities. This will be a long process, but one that offers the best chance for success.

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